The Frankfurt School wanted socialism

Contra Rockhill

Chris Cutrone

Gabriel Rockhill, *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2025).

> Where political influence is possible without betraying the truth, it should be practiced to the best of our abilities. Given the circumstance that there is no truth, this influence will remain almost purely theoretical. This means, in other words, that in the present historical situation, salvation lies in thinking and politics lies in thinking; that we are therefore consciously thrown back into a Stoic standpoint — not because we would tell the existentialists they are the Stoics, but because we would cry out: we are the Stoics because there is no party.
> — Max Horkheimer with Theodor W. Adorno, "Rescue of the Enlightenment" (1946)[1]

WHAT IS STALINISM? It is the liquidation of Marxism. More precisely, it is the liquidation of the Marxist self-consciousness and theory of the proletarian socialist party — it is also the practical liquidation of that party. What is most troubling about the history of "Marxism-Leninism" AKA Stalinism is, like with the Jacobins, not their ruthlessness towards avowed counterrevolutionaries, but rather the Revolution eating its own — the unjust and murderous turn against the loyal revolutionaries themselves. The problem with Stalinism is the lies it entails — the lies against the revolutionaries, and against the Revolution itself. And the lies never end.

These lies are not only about socialism but more directly the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the Marxist sense of the rule of the working class directed to overcoming capitalism. The goal of the revolution, according to Marxism, is establishing this dictatorship of the proletariat, which is not itself the achievement of socialism but its mere precondition. The question is whether Communist Party rule in China, Cuba, Vietnam, or North Korea today means the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There are real reasons to doubt it.

Such skepticism about the "Marxist" *bona fides* of the ruling Communist Parties didn't begin yesterday, but long ago. It is the question that has haunted Marxism since the Russian Revolution, which has only been compounded by its ramified results beyond the Soviet Union, and continues to persist after the latter's demise.

The Marxist Critical Theorists of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt are among those who maintained these questions and problems of the Revolution and its results. Their notorious "negativity" contrasts starkly with the apparent positive results of "actually existing socialism" — at least according to the ideological claims of the Communist Parties. What right did the Frankfurters have to doubt the positive claims of the real revolutions of their time? In this they followed Marx in his early — and never abandoned — demand for the "ruthless criticism of everything that exists." First and foremost for Marxist criticism was the socialist or communist movement itself, which Marx considered the highest — that is, the most acute and self-contradictory — phenomenon of "bourgeois ideology." As he wrote in his September 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge,

> I am not in favor of raising any dogmatic banner. On the contrary, we must try to help the dogmatists to clarify their propositions for themselves. Thus, communism, in particular, is a dogmatic abstraction; in which connection, however, I am not thinking of some imaginary and possible communism, but actually existing communism.

Furthermore, Marx wrote that,

> This communism is itself only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property. The abolition of private property is therefore by no means identical with communism and communism has seen other socialist theories, such as those of Fourier and Proudhon, rising up in opposition to it, not fortuitously but necessarily, because it is only a particular, one-sided realization of the principle of socialism.

The critical task of Marxism did not end with the 1917 Russian Revolution, by any means, let alone in 1949 or 1959. If anything, Marxist critique — including the critique of Marxism itself, the critique that was practiced by Lenin and other Marxists before and after 1917 — became more urgent, let alone when "Marxism" became an official state ideology.

What was practiced after Lenin's death — namely, Stalinism — was a malicious, bureaucratic mockery of Marxist critique. So there were relatively very few Marxists who took up the true duty of critique since then. There still are hardly any at all. (Perhaps there is only one?) The primacy of such critique might seem obscure today, which is all the more reason its light should not be extinguished. Socialism will not be possible without it. The criticism of attempts at socialism should not be left to the avowed Right, since they disbelieve it anyway and so do so in bad faith.

Instead, Marxist Critical Theory is vilified on the "Left," often abusing a parodical version of "Marxism" to do so.

Gabriel Rockhill's treatment of the Frankfurt School in his book *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* is beyond inaccurate: it is dishonest. Let me demonstrate my point with some analysis of Rockhill's quotations of the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists in his book.

It seems that from the professional safety of academic tenure, Rockhill has unleashed uninhibited vitriol against what has been his own area of expertise and the basis of his success, specifically "French" theory, expressing bitterness at its obvious and complacent dead end. It is not accidental that this apostasy from prior academic fashion is coinciding with the end of neoliberalism — the exhaustion of "postmodern" capitalism. But what replaces it is unabashed philistinism. Rockhill is its perfect exemplar. But this theoretical suicide is not noble, let alone heroic, but unseemly. The French Fries begging to differ from Stalinist orthodoxy of their time is subject to a posthumous show-trial frame-job. I am as annoyed by Deleuze and Foucault as anyone, but even the guilty should be given a fair shake.

As with Domenico Losurdo, Rockhill uses innuendo and guilt-by-association rather than actual clear statements by his subjects. When there is any direct quotation, it is tendentiously selected and deliberately taken out of context in order to cast it in the most possibly unfavorable light.

It's just lying. It's deliberately dishonest. If you have to lie, then you're not only incorrect but not in the right. Some basic intellectual ethics are required, especially when there is disagreement, otherwise the issues are muddled. But this is not merely a matter of disagreement or debate but slander — character-assassination. It's trying to take advantage of and reinforce the ignorance of readers — students. It is basic miseducation. Rockhill is telling students not to bother considering the Frankfurt School at all.

This is the opposite of enlightening. It's the usual Big Lie campaign of shameless propaganda that one expects from capitalist politics, but won't do for the proletarian struggle for socialism, which, if it is ever to succeed, cannot be based on lies.

I will not lie to you.

Here's Rockhill (188):

> Adorno's overall position, like Herbert Marcuse's, was summarized by Marie-Josée Levallée in the following terms: "The Bolshevik party, which Lenin made the vanguard of the October Revolution, was a centralizing and repressive institution which would shape the Soviet State in its image and turn the dictatorship of the proletariat into its own dictatorship."[30] In an interesting — though debatable — formulation, Leo Löwenthal described the Institute's form of critical theory as one that rejected both "the Social Democratic and the Bolshevik versions of Marxism" in favor of continuing "the radical Enlightenment tradition."[31]

30. Marie-Josée Levallée, "October and the Prospects for Revolution: The Views of Arendt, Adorno, and Marcuse," *The Russian Revolution as Ideal and Practice: Failures, Legacies, and the Future of Revolution*, ed. Thomas Telios, et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 173.
31. Löwenthal, *An Unmastered Past*, 65. In the 1930s, Löwenthal explained, the few defenders of the USSR in their circles — Karl Wittfogel, Henryk Grossman, and Ernst Bloch — referred to Horkheimer's group as the "swine on 117th Street" (the location of their Columbia University house) (ibid., 66). Horkheimer had even claimed that "it would not surprise him if an alliance developed between Hitler and Stalin, if Hitler made only the least overture" (ibid.) (188).

But there was indeed such an alliance, albeit betrayed by Hitler! — Why does Rockhill summarize someone else's paraphrasing(!), instead of quoting original sources? Rockhill doesn't quote the passages from *Towards a New Manifesto* (1956) where Horkheimer and Adorno state clearly that they sought to follow Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

My own academic work, both in my PhD doctoral dissertation, and presented and discussed at several international Marcuse and Adorno conferences, and published in several journals, helped bring this matter to light, and indeed helped prompt the translation and publication of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Towards a New Manifesto* to begin with. And there are many other examples of Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer's writings stating their adherence to Lenin's views, as well as their explicit sympathy for the victims of — and blaming "imperialism" for — the oppressive conditions suffered in Russia and elsewhere.

What was going on in 1956 to inspire their contemplation of writing a new Communist Manifesto for the 20th century? Soviet Communist leader Nikita Khrushchev had criticized Stalin and the official "Marxism-Leninism" ideology he had instituted, as itself committing "crimes against Leninism." In Eastern Europe there were popular uprisings against Communist Party rule — about which Bertolt Brecht, who died in 1956, had written, in a poem titled "The Solution" in 1953:

> Would it not in that case
> Be simpler for the government
> To dissolve the people
> And elect another?

For his part, Adorno said: "I have always wanted to . . . develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin." Horkheimer responded laconically, "Who would not subscribe to that?" — Here is the full quotation:

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The Platypus Review

Issue 187 | June 2026

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

Phedias Christodoulides
Dalhousie Student Union
Loyola University of Chicago
The New School
New York University
Northwestern University
The Platypus Affiliated Society
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
The University of Chicago Student Government
The University of Illinois at Chicago

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The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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The revolution next time

Wiser and on firmer ground

David McMullen

WHEN A RADICAL LEFT worth its salt eventually sees the light of day, one of its tasks will be to put up a strong case against the prevailing belief that communism has gone to a well-deserved grave. The narrative that it was an inherently flawed project will have to be matched by a tale of unfavorable terrain, ill-equipped forces, and treacherous commanders — and how future class contests will take place on ground far better prepared by capitalism, with the benefit of past lessons learned. This article aims to be a modest contribution to this effort.

The reversion to capitalism by the "socialist camp" was certainly an eye-opener. It laid bare the fact that society had not undergone a fundamental transformation in the relations of production and the social superstructure. There was nothing comparable to the way capitalism had made itself immune to a relapse into feudalism or something similar.

What was particularly remarkable was the lack of interest in carrying out this task, with the rulers who emerged leading the way in this respect. Instead, what we saw was the development of a system which possessed a dubious veneer of "socialism" but in fact made capitalism look good in comparison. Socialism was lipstick on a pig.

The political cover for this counter-revolution was what has been called the theory of the productive forces. According to this thinking, "communist man" would magically appear sometime down the track simply by achieving a sufficiently high level of economic development. This was wrong on two levels. Firstly, no amount of economic development will in itself transform a society where the "intelligentsia" pursues pelf and place, and the rank-and-file masses have turned apathy into an art form. Secondly, this kind of behavior, to which capitalism is much better adapted, becomes an increasingly serious drag on production in a socially owned economy where a very different spirit is required. With a return to revolution ruled out by the lack of a revolutionary working class — and by security forces ready to crush it if there had been one — capitalism was the only response to the malaise.

In the early 1990s, the leadership in the Soviet Union abandoned all pretense and introduced a klepto-mafia variant of capitalism. Not long before, the regimes in Eastern Europe had collapsed as soon as Gorbachev had made it clear that he would not militarily intervene to prop them up. The Chinese and Vietnamese regimes, after seeing what had happened in the Soviet bloc, decided that it would be more "politically stable" to carry out "reforms" while still waving the red flag. Their timid introduction of commodity relations became a torrent as capitalism was rebranded a preliminary stage of socialism.

This is all very grim, but does it augur badly for the future? Revolutions down the track will no doubt have their own particular problems. However, they will differ from these past episodes in ways that should make them far more able to stay the course, and defeat the turncoats and phonies. Of special importance is the fact that the revolutions will have a full-blown proletarian character.

In the Russian Revolution, the working class was not the main force behind the consolidation of power. While that class was decisive in October 1917, the victory in the subsequent civil war was due to the much larger peasantry being, on the whole, less keen on the alternatives. By the end of the war, what had already been a small working class had effectively disappeared through deaths and the destruction of industry. The Bolsheviks then had to create a new, roughly hewn working class out of the peasantry.

In China and Vietnam, peasants were predominant from the start. In the eastern European countries, the working class was larger, but the new regimes were primarily the product of the continued presence of the Soviet Red Army — after the defeat of Nazi Germany — rather than local revolutionary zeal.

Unlike these past revolutions, those in the future will occur in societies that are overwhelmingly working class (i.e., wage- and salary-earners), and will only take off if a large section of this class has decided that they have had enough of the present system and have been strongly drawn to the only society that can replace it — namely, one taking the road to a classless society based on common ownership of the means of production. Once this large mass of revolutionaries has removed the capitalists and their supporters from power, it is reasonable to expect that it would commit itself to the step-by-step transformation of society. It is hard to imagine these people enduring the bitter struggle to dislodge the bourgeoisie just to leave the job unfinished and let conditions ripen for a restoration. Indeed, many of them will make the success of this ongoing revolution a primary mission in life.

With the capitalists out of the way, workers will now have a chance to bring about changes that are necessary but were previously impossible. Put simply, they will eliminate a society based on dog-eat-dog competition and create one based on mutual regard and cooperation. You might call this changing human nature — or alternatively, learning to behave in ways that are more in tune with our true nature. But no matter how you characterize it, this change will not simply happen in a smooth, uncontested fashion. It will have to be fought over.

Central to everything will be the transformation of work and how we relate to each other in production. This is where capitalism creates a road block to a better society. The task is to end our alienation from the production process, from the final product of our labor, and from the people we work with. This will enable us to develop and exercise our talents and increasingly thrive. Work will become something we normally want to do, and when we see that society is working with us rather than against us, we will be keen to contribute the best we can to the common pot.

Starting from a far greater level of economic development will be a major advantage over past revolutions. As a rule, work is becoming increasingly less arduous and tedious, and is generally more cerebral and sociable. Furthermore, labor productivity is far higher and bound to shoot up with innovations such as AI. So, equality will not mean shared poverty and endless toil, but rather shared affluence: work fit for humans and ample free time. The devastation from war may undo this to some extent. However, if workers still have their knowledge and abilities, they should be able to rebuild fairly quickly. Also, in the decades ahead we can expect the global South to continue its not-always-hasty emergence from backwardness. With these advanced productive forces, the revolution will then be able to transform work in ways that capitalism cannot. It will eliminate the old and no longer necessary division of labor, and also change how we generally treat each other in our work dealings.

Under the present system, there is a division of labor that excessively separates thinking and deciding from execution. As a result, work is oppressive and narrow. This makes perfect sense under capitalism. Unwilling wage slaves have to be supervised and told what to do; a hierarchical career structure is needed to give a middle stratum an investment in the system, and sometimes capitalists want to take charge of production decisions directly.

These old ways of doing things cannot be changed overnight. It will take time for the rank-and-file to take on this larger role. They will have to raise their level of education, struggle up all kinds of learning curves, break down fears, and gain confidence. And while they are doing this, they will have to contend with people who want to discourage them and slow down the process. Resistance and foot-dragging will come from various quarters. These include die-hard opponents: the old management that cannot be immediately dispensed with, people who are simply comfortable with how things are and find change too messy, and supposed revolutionaries who simply want to take over the old positions and not really change anything.

Personal relations between workers will also have to be put on a much more human footing if work is to be something we are generally keen about and become a place where we thrive and develop. We have a lot to learn when it comes to creating productive and congenial relations with others — we lack social skills, self-awareness, and empathy. We are not that good at clearing up misunderstandings or resolving conflicts. We are not always helpful. On top of that, there are people who have specific behavioral problems, often with a clinical diagnosis attached. Some individuals have anxieties and other disorders that cause their interactions to be disturbing for themselves and others. Then there are toxic people who engage in bullying, scheming, and lying, and who in many cases can be described as control freaks, narcissists, sociopaths, or psychopaths. This last group will include serious opponents of the revolution.

The large and determined revolutionary movement we mentioned earlier will have to lead the charge in this struggle for change. It will be their task to constitute a critical mass of people of sufficient size to get round the collective-action problem. Everyone knows that their individual efforts are worthwhile because they know that there are a whole lot of other similarly committed people, and that they are all contributing to the large pool of combined efforts. These are not isolated acts of futility swamped by reverse currents. And success encourages more people to come on board.

The effectiveness of revolutionaries will depend on developing a whole range of strengths as they steel themselves in stormy seas. These include self-confidence, emotional intelligence, and the whole range of social skills. They will also need to lead the way in casting off the passive, submissive, and weak-spirited behavior that results from life as subordinates under capitalism.

Fortitude and commitment will also be required to deal with difficult situations when it would be easier to keep quiet or find another job. Contending with bad actors will demand moral courage because they are bound to retaliate in devious ways. They may set you up, claim that you are the problem and not them, take advantage of your mistakes, and use any position of authority they may have.

Dealing with people in authority or of high standing who have started to be a hindrance rather than a help will be particularly tricky and indeed will be the most critical and difficult struggle. Even though subordination will progressively decline in extent and grimness, one can expect that for some time there will still be many occasions where subordinates will need to question or disobey dubious instructions or policies from people who can hit back in nasty ways. Guts will be required.

When work lets more of the sunshine in, and builds strengths rather than weaknesses, it is of course bound to impact how we relate to people in other realms, including the more personal. We can expect less domestic and social maladies, and better management of them. And of course the more congenial and fruitful our relations outside work, the keener we will be to serve others with our labors.

In the social "superstructure" there will have to be just as much class struggle as there is in the economy. The various cultural strongholds will have to be captured from their present incumbents. Revolutionaries in large numbers will have to invade the zone with works inspiring optimism and resolve, and we will need a strong and growing brigade of intellectuals capable of taking on reactionaries past and present.

Politics at the highest local and central levels will matter more than anything. For quite some time, considerable power and policy direction will be concentrated there. Retaining and consolidating control will be critical. If conservative elements make their way into the leadership and have a significant social base willing to follow them, there will be a serious problem that requires an urgent rallying of radical forces.

Democracy and free speech will be critical for success. The development of the best policy and practice requires exposure to the bracing winds of questioning and criticism. Ensuring that subordinates can keep an eye on their superiors will require an open and free society. This will require considerable transparency and free access to information, plus limited room for the suppression of criticism.

Democracy was not possible in the 20th-century revolutions because, as we have mentioned, they were not based on majority support. And, of course, this situation did not improve over time because the regimes had veered well off the flight path and were clearly not leading people to something better than capitalism and therefore worth supporting. Capitalism also has a problem with democracy. It dispenses with it when those near the levers of power consider that it is taking society into what, for them, are dangerous waters, or when they think that tyranny will reap them material rewards.

Talking positively about the prospects of proletarian revolution will be considered very much in poor taste. But in these "interesting" times, more than a few people may begin to recognize this remedy as the elephant in the room. And with the sparring between conservatives and liberals presently hogging the ideas space, their united hostility to such an apparition would be a blunt reminder that there is no substantial difference between them, and that they will be brothers in arms when it comes to the crunch. **|P**

"The Frankfurt School wanted socialism," continued from page 1

[30 March:]

ADORNO: What irritates me so much about the entire relationship between theory and practice is something quite obvious, namely the experience that everything the Russians write slips into ideology, into crude, stupid twaddle, that culture is rubbish and that somewhere, at the very same spot as in Marx and Engels, there is an element of re-barbarization. Thinking in their [the Russians'] writings is more reified than in the most advanced bourgeois thought. I have always wanted to rectify that and develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin, while keeping up with culture at its most advanced.

HORKHEIMER: Who would not subscribe to that? You wish to retain culture, but being ruthless and barbaric is necessarily part of this culture. Your attitude has something of Don Quixote about it. You would like to omit whatever doesn't suit you, as if this culture could survive in present conditions without the injustice we both hate.

ADORNO: The ruthless critique of this culture is one element of our own activity.[2]

— Instead, Rockhill quotes Horkheimer with an almost self-parodying strung-together set of ellipses: "In the East . . . they have chosen slavery. . . . We have to reject . . . Marxism" (220). — What Horkheimer actually said:

[12 March:]

HORKHEIMER: Your view is that we should live our lives in such a way that things will get better in a hundred years. That's more or less what the parson says too.

ADORNO: Our disagreement is about whether history can succeed or not. How are we to interpret the 'can'? On the one hand, the world contains opportunities enough for success. On the other hand, everything is bewitched, as if under a spell. If the spell could be broken, success would be a possibility. If people want to persuade us that the conditional nature of man sets limits to utopia, that is simply untrue. The possibility of a completely unshackled reality remains valid. In a world in which senseless suffering has ceased to exist, Schopenhauer is wrong.

HORKHEIMER: In the long run things cannot change. The possibility of regression is always there. That means we have to reject both Marxism and ontology. Neither the good nor the bad remains, but the bad is more likely to survive. The critical mind must free itself from a Marxism which says that all will be well if only you become a socialist. We can expect nothing more from mankind than a more or less worn-out version of the American system. The difference between us is that Teddie still retains a certain penchant for theology. My own thoughts tend to move in the direction of saying that good people are dying out. In the circumstances, planning would offer the best prospect.

ADORNO: If the result of planning was that beggars would cease to exist, then planning itself would shed its rigidity, and decisive change would be the result.

HORKHEIMER: Perhaps, but a relapse into barbarism is no less conceivable.

ADORNO: Relapse into barbarism is always an option. If the world were so planned that everything one did served the whole of society in a transparent manner, and senseless activities were abandoned, I would be happy to spend two hours a day working as a lift attendant.

HORKHEIMER: An assertion of that kind leads us directly to reformism.

ADORNO: Reform of the administration cannot be brought about by peaceful means.[3]

Rockhill (219):

> Moreover, it is in this context that Horkheimer doubled down on their social chauvinism by averring, in a world-historical conclusion that provoked no rebuttal on the part of his "Leninist" collaborator: "I believe that Europe and America are probably the best civilizations that history has produced up to now as far as prosperity and justice are concerned. The key point now is to ensure the preservation of these gains."

— What was actually said by Adorno and Horkheimer:

ADORNO: I have the feeling that, under the banner of Marxism, the East might overtake Western civilization. This would mean a shift in the entire dynamics of history. Marxism is being adopted in Asia in much the same way as Christianity was taken up in Mexico at one time. Europe too will probably be swallowed up at some point in the future.

HORKHEIMER: I believe that Europe and America are probably the best civilizations that history has produced up to now as far as prosperity and justice are concerned. The key point now is to ensure the preservation of these gains. That can be achieved only if we remain ruthlessly critical of this civilization.

ADORNO: We cannot call for the defence of the Western world.

HORKHEIMER: We cannot do so because that would destroy it. If we were to defend the Russians, that's like regarding the invading Teutonic hordes as morally superior to the [Roman] slave economy. We have nothing in common with Russian bureaucrats. But they stand for a greater right as opposed to Western culture. It is the fault of the West that the Russian Revolution went the way it did. I am always terribly afraid that if we start talking about politics, it will produce the kind of discussion that used to be customary in the Institute.[4]

To quote Marx from the sign-off at the end of his "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875), which both criticized the consciousness of the first ostensibly "Marxist" political party established by his followers, and laid out in explicit terms his vision of the task of proletarian socialism: "*Dixi et salvavi animam meam*" ("I have spoken and saved my soul"). So have I. Everyone has to think for themselves. There's no "we" in socialism, comrades. **|P**

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[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Rettung der Aufklärung. Diskussionen über eine geplante Schrift zur Dialektik," in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, *Nachgelassene Schriften 1931–1949*, eds. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985), 593–605, <https://jamescrane.substack.com/p/horkheimer-and-adornorettung-der>.

[2] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011), 102–04.

[3] Ibid., 20–22.

[4] Ibid., 35–36.

"On *The Condition of Postmodernity*," continued from page 2

obsession with postmodernism. The assumption of a lost practical potential hurts more than a blind spot — as a torn-out eye — because it remains so vague: what could the New Left really have become had it been armed with Harvey's critical insight that came 20 years later? What did the Millennial Left become when actually armed with his critique 20 years after him? Harvey — like his object of critique, postmodernism — can only trace change. In the terms "postmodernism" and "accumulation regime" — as illuminating as they are — no subject or object can be discerned. There is only a sequence of reconfigurations of capital relations. Thus he cannot seriously consider the New Left as a subject in history, as an actor. This makes Harvey's view of history contemplative. Ultimately, his logical identification of the New Left and postmodernism appears to be a back-projected doubling of his own contemplative stance. Contrary to the notion of an unexploited practical horizon, this identification implies that the New Left could only have become postmodernism in social criticism, aesthetics, and the state. The evoked missed opportunity — Harvey's apparent motivation — is undermined precisely in the attempt to explain the failure of the New Left in retrospect by attributing a lack of insight. Thus Harvey's theory is also fundamentally damaged. The possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship between theory and practice leads to a strange, undead existence.

In this way, Harvey also writes the entire history of modernity according to Baudelaire's scheme of the duality of fleetingness and eternity. According to Harvey, the thinkers of the 18th-century Enlightenment have already speculated on the eternal moments of modern man: freedom, equality, universal reason, and the belief in human intelligence, which are revealed and realized through dynamism — world trade, scientific and technological progress, and the fall of the *ancien régime*. Harvey places Marx in this continuity because of Marx's description of the creative destruction of capital and its revolutionary potential in, for example, the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). In contrast to previous thinkers, allegedly, Marx was able to gain insight into the origin of the two poles of modernism by analyzing the all-dominant commodity form: by levelling particular characteristics of commodities and people through their comparability in value, expressed in money, a new form of domination had emerged, which Marx felt needed to be understood and overcome — while at the same time he recognized and wanted to continue the historical specificity of the free market as an emancipation from traditional societies. This is a widespread misconception to this day.

Even *pre-Marxist*, bourgeois philosophy went beyond the setting of reason by the Enlightenment: Hegel, Kant, and Smith — whom Harvey mentions — are already immanent critics of the Enlightenment. Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), already points out the dangers of a one-sided realization of enlightenment in the sense of instrumental reason: for example, the atrophy of the mind and thus the hindering of individual development through monotonous work as a danger of the division of labor.[22] He therefore called for state intervention to ensure a basic minimum level of education for all citizens. Smith was also aware of the risk of impoverishment through the market. While the advantages of the free market and the division of labor had already been emphasized in the previous century, one might think that Smith's originality lies in his call for a legal basis for labor organizations, whose struggle for higher wages would serve the greater good and prosperity of society as a whole. Smith did not posit an eternal automatism of an "invisible hand of the market," but thought in specific historical terms about the way in which the ideals of the Enlightenment already materialize and undermine, in order to show which conscious transformation by which subject is necessary. This reflection on the conditions of the possibilities for transformation of society as a whole is based on the

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"A state of crisis and a century of revolution"

The legacy of the French Revolution

Dominique Pagani

On November 14, 2025, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel on the legacy of the French Revolution during the Platypus European Conference in Leipzig with panelists Dennis Graemer (formerly of the Association for the Design of History) and Mike Macnair (Communist Party of Great Britain (PCC) and author of Revolutionary Strategy *(2008)).*[1] *Dominique Pagani, author of* Femininity and Community in Hegel *(2010),*[2] *had been scheduled to be the third panelist but was not able to attend the event. The following comprises Pagani's prepared opening remarks, translated from French by Platypus member Lucas Zabotin.*[3]

NEARLY TWO AND A HALF CENTURIES after the storming of the Bastille, does our historical present still have something to learn from the French Revolution? Two and a half centuries — such a length of time seems to cast the event into an already distant past. And yet, the answers to this question are more passionately contradictory than ever. It is already remarkable to note that the French Revolution is received principally by the extremes of the political spectrum: either it is received with enthusiasm, as is the case among a certain far Left, or it is seen as the principal cause of the ills afflicting the modern world. Such is the view of the political Right and especially, *a fortiori*, the more we move towards the far Right. As such, our historical present, at least for what has come to be called "the West," increasingly falls prey to these ultra-reactionary, counterrevolutionary sirens. On both sides of the Atlantic, what is making headlines are not the ideals of the French Revolution, but rather the worrying rise of the Right, especially the far Right. This should give us pause for thought.

On the other hand, we must already conclude from this simple fact that the positive or negative reception of the French Revolution today takes place principally at the extremes. The part of the political spectrum which seems to be least concerned is the Center, that is, the extreme Center — a concept to which we should accustom ourselves. This "Center" seems to have been in power since about the end of World War II, whether it be Center-Right or Center-Left. Is there a decisive difference here, keeping to the French context, between Sarkozy and Hollande, or between Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand? All four are pro-European — by which I mean Europe reduced to the "European Union" — and therefore are, in Cold War terms, Atlanticists. And yet what is most insidious here is that much of this extreme Center claims to be the Left. Indeed, what goes by the name of the "New Left" of the post-war period — including the anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists, and so on — I instead call the liberal-libertarian counterrevolution.

We must recall here, on this point, that in the draft Constitution which we were presented by the European Union in 2005, and which was subject to a referendum: the chapters concerning defense and foreign policy merely referred to NATO decisions! In a referendum, 55% of voters in France said "No" to this draft Constitution, yet it was nonetheless imposed on us. This should be sufficient demonstration of the absurdity of the notion of the political "Center" — one which disregards the democratic will of the people. The Western extreme Center is indeed an extreme. Three million dead in Vietnam. Three million dead, a few years prior, in the Korean War. In both cases, it was at the hands of NATO powers, and in particular the Pentagon: it was necessary to punish these countries which, although thousands of kilometers from the United States, had the silly idea of opting for communism. Six million deaths then, without counting the permanent blood-bath in Latin America with its coups d'états and its *pronunciamentos*[4] throughout the Cold War, as well as recent events in Venezuela, the instability in Ecuador and Peru, and the neo-fascism developing in Argentina.

I insist on this point because it's not immediately apparent that this proliferation of opinions regarding the French Revolution primarily concerns the Left. If we look to the Right, condemnation of the Revolution is unanimous. A reference to the ideologue-in-chief of the Third Reich should be sufficient proof. I'm thinking, of course, of Mr. Alfred Rosenberg, who said, "The revolution of 1789 is dead. It has been but an explosion without creative thought, which is why we are today witnessing its decomposition."[5] This declaration is interesting for two reasons: not only does it illustrate as clear as day the quasi-unanimous position of the far Right on the French Revolution, but it also shows the extent to which the French Revolution has supposedly long ceased to be meaningful, since Rosenberg goes as far as to speak of its "decomposition."

It is even more surprising to note that this condemnation has a deep history, much older than the Third Reich, almost as old as the Revolution of 1789 itself. This is what I will try to illustrate with two texts, as antithetical as can be: one by the philosopher Hegel, and the other by the novelist and poet Achim von Arnim — one of the most important German Romantics and part of the Jena group. Here is von Arnim in one of his admirable novels, *The Heirs of the Majorat* (1820):

> The other day, we were leafing through an old almanac whose engravings depicted the follies of the year. How far behind us all that lies now, already turned into legend! How full the world was then, before that universal revolution to which France has given its name had overturned everything! How uniformly impoverished it has since become! Centuries seem to separate us from that happy time, and we can scarcely remember that our earliest years still belonged to it. . . . When one delves into those oddities whose image has been preserved for us by Chodowiecki's talent, one discovers the loftiness, the subtlety, and the clarity of the spirit of that age; it mingles with all the silhouettes that pass before the draftsman's eyes. What harmony, what delicacy of nuance is found in every detail of life! Each individual formed, in manner and in dress, a world unto himself; each established himself upon this earth as though he were to remain there for all eternity, and as people sought to live as well as possible, they welcomed with enthusiasm the visionaries, conjurers, secret gatherings and mysterious adventures, marvellous remedies, and prophetic invalids who offered nourishment to the impatience and curiosity of the heart. . . . To how many centuries did that era not still cling through institutions which upheld themselves nobly against all change!

Von Arnim is speaking of the time before the Revolution, that of the ancien régime. The word "eternity" alone captures the spirit of the passage, as it repeatedly pays homage to stability, to everything that is the inverse of time and of change. It bears emphasizing in order to better highlight the contrast with the Hegel text I will turn to below.

I insist on this ending: "institutions which upheld themselves nobly against all change!" Here is what he admires most in the *ancien régime* and that the French Revolution abolished — that is, the permanence assured by the institutions. It is almost a metonymy for the Holy Roman Empire. Let me be clear: I am not opposing France to Germany. Not all of France is the French Revolution, and not all of Germany is Right-wing or far-Right. But what is certain is that the Holy Roman Empire perfectly illustrates what von Armin means here: the collaboration of two institutions, the empire and the Catholic Church, before the Reformation in the 16th century, with the Pope as the leader of Christianity. With this hymn to permanence and allergy to all change characterizing the text, I hardly need to underline the contrast with that of Hegel:

> Thanks to the bath of her Revolution, the French Nation has freed herself of many institutions which the human spirit had outgrown like the shoes of a child. These institutions accordingly once oppressed her, and they now continue to oppress other nations as so many fetters devoid of spirit. What is even more, however, is that the individual as well has shed the fear of death along with the life of habit — which, with the change of scenery, is no longer self-supporting. This is what gives this Nation the great power she displays against others. She weighs down upon the impassiveness and dullness of these other nations, which, finally forced to give up their indolence in order to step into actuality, will perhaps — seeing that inwardness preserves itself in externality — surpass their teachers.[6]

What Hegel designates here with the word "actuality" is not merely different from what von Arnim said but the exact inverse: actuality is neither permanence nor eternity but temporality. Now, this can be an empty temporality, wasted time, time used towards positive or negative ends, magnificent or criminal ends; regardless, actuality is only effective as temporality, as change. This is what the German Romantic refused to see, for this temporality implies finitude, death, and the immense repression it can induce. When Hegel speaks here of death, he means not the death which awaits me later, but the death which applies to each and every one of us at every moment of life, immanent to life itself. It's the famous river in which Heraclitus, the father of the dialectic, said we never swim twice. I insist on the dialectical quality of this Hegel passage, already in 1807! This is the year in which he completed *The Phenomenology of Spirit* — the publication marks the end of his so-called "young" period and therefore begins his mature period. It is all the more important, then, to recognize the emphasis put in this text on change and historical movement.

Marx revisits this fundamental attribute of the dialectic in homage to Hegel, stating that what separates him from the philosopher is not the content of what Hegel says but the mystical form in which he draped it.[7] With the caution of a German civil servant, Hegel knew well that he was surveilled by the censorship of his employer which was particularly vigilant concerning what appeared to be influenced by what at the time was referred to as "French ideas," that is, ideas coming from the French Revolution. Let's not forget that Hegel, the great poet Hölderlin, and Schelling — the most emblematic philosopher of this very fruitful period for German Romanticism — were students together at the Tübingen theological seminary where together they planted a tree of liberty to commemorate the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. You see, we began with a text by Achim von Arnim insisting, on the contrary, on all that is timeless and blaming the French Revolution — in the sense that Nietzsche will later speak of *ressentiment* — for having brought about upheaval, change, and becoming, to that which saw itself as timeless and eternal. With Hegel we have the antithesis.

I will resist the formalistic temptation which would have me propose my own synthesis here. So if I do indeed proceed and succumb to providing a synthesis, it is because this synthesis has already been expressed, paradoxically, before both von Achim and Hegel's texts. Before the thesis and the antithesis, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had, throughout his oeuvre, produced a prodigious synthesis of what is at play here, namely, the reconciliation of what will be called in Marxian terms "praxis" and that to which the Romantics typically devoted themselves, that is, "psyche." Here is Rousseau from *The Social Contract*:

> The passing from the state of nature to civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him for ever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man.[8]

Pardon the interruption of a text so dense that it asks not to be explained but made explicit. Rousseau is speaking now of the abuses of this new condition which can degrade him below the state he had left. How can one be below the animal? That the animal is a beast is not a problem; the problem is rather that the human animal can become bestial, even lower than an animal. The animal can do neither good nor evil. It does what it can, and when it has exhausted its forces, it lays down and dies. Perhaps all that is worth recovering from existentialism is its recognition that the animal subsists, while only man exists.

How might we abuse civil society? This is the question we must ask ourselves. Rousseau is presenting us with a model of absolute evil. In the 19th century already, immediately following the French Revolution, there was a phenomenon known as *le mal du siècle*.[9] The 20th century, however, was undeniably the century of evil, the century of death camps. These are the stakes in Rousseau's crucial text. Abuse here is not meant in the sense that one might abuse alcohol. Here, abuse means to deceive, to cheat, to trick. What is this ruse that lies at the heart of absolute evil? It is to restore power relations in civil society. Power relations in the state of nature are not evil. When in the African savannah — as I myself have witnessed — a pack of wild dogs pursues a gazelle as it attempts to give birth, and the dogs attack the embryo before it has the time to reach the ground, we can say this is terrible. But the dogs also have children to feed in their den, do they not? There is neither good nor evil here. Far more serious, though, is what Rousseau speaks of, this descent into Hell — if I can allow myself the religious metaphor — that is, the absolute evil which is the abuse of civil society.

I will now move rather prosaically from a religious metaphor to an economic one. Rousseau unveils that there may be two opposed ways of dealing with our relation to the other in civil society: one leads to justice, to the good, to the law, and the other contradicts these by reintroducing force or power under the guise of law. The blackmail carried out by certain world powers, not least in the contemporary world, unmistakably illustrates what I mean. Let me take the example of the Vietnam War, during which there was the systematic use of napalm and its 3 million deaths in the name of — under the guise of — the "free world." This is how power relations are never more deleterious, deadly, pernicious, and criminal than when they are cloaked in the law and rights.

Rousseau, after theorizing absolute evil, concludes the chapter by addressing the problem of property. He does not condemn all forms of property — my toothbrush, my husband or wife, etc. No, Rousseau condemns "possession":

> If we are to avoid mistakes in weighing the one side against the other, we must clearly distinguish between natural liberty, which has no limit but the physical power of the individual concerned, and civil liberty, which is limited by the general will; and we must distinguish also between possession, which is based only on force or 'the right of first occupant', and property, which must rest on a legal title. We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom.[10]

This conclusion is crucial because it deals with the most important concept of all those debated during the French Revolution, namely, the concept of liberty and all the confusion to which it gives rise — of which my example of the Vietnam War was one. Rousseau opposes two modalities of liberty: "natural liberty" limited by the power of the individual, and "civil liberty," "limited by the general will." And what is the general will but the collective product of tens of thousands of years of human history? Such are the stakes of the French Revolution for which Rousseau was, among all the Enlightenment philosophers, the principal inspiration.

There's no better way to conclude this formidable synthesis than by evoking the admirable formula of Thomas Mann, one of those who has saved the honor of the German intelligentsia in the nation's darkest hours. To paraphrase Mann, Germany's problems, and therefore those of Europe, will only be resolved through the reconciliation of Marx and Hölderlin. **|P**

[1] Dennis Graemer and Mike Macnair, "The legacy of the French Revolution" (November 14, 2025), <https://youtu.be/6Z2hTF68v_s>.

[2] Dominique Pagani, *Féminité et communauté chez Hegel: Le rapport de l'esthétique au politique dans le système* (Paris: Editions Delga, 2010).

[3] The quotation in the title comes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or Treatise on Education*, trans. William H. Payne (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 175.

[4] [Spanish] Public political manifestos or proclamations; literally, pronouncements. These were typically issued by military officers or political parties.

[5] Attributed to Alfred Rosenberg's "Gold and Blood" speech (November 28, 1940); see "Gold und Blut: Rede am 28. November 1940 in der französischen Abgeordnetenkammer zu Paris," *Hier spricht das neue Deutschland!* 15 (1941): 3–21, <https://dokumen.pub/gold-und-blut.html>.

[6] G. W. F. Hegel to Christian Gotthold Zellman (January 23, 1807), in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 123.

[7] Karl Marx, "Afterword to the Second German Edition" (1873), in *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867).

[8] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Civil Society," in *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 64–65.

[9] [French] The evil of the century.

[10] Rousseau, "Civil Society," 65.

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idea of freedom. Since Rousseau and Marx, freedom has meant the development of the human species solely on the basis of all its previous developments, realized through the constitution of a social collective subject. In this sense, freedom is posited speculatively — not as a fact, but as a task, as a condition of human existence that is to be practically proven. History is the site of this universal project — of progress in the consciousness of freedom, to use Hegel's language.[23] After the failed revolutions of 1848 and the emergence of the Bonapartist state, which hovers above and hinders this social process, a profound crisis of this project becomes apparent. This is what's symptomatically expressed in the fast-paced, wrestling avant-gardes of modernist art, characterized by Baudelaire's polarity of the eternally fleeting.

Did the Millennial Left and the present Left fail because they could not think of a transformation of the accumulation regime — according to Harvey, it's a decentralized-imperialist one — as an opportunity, as something that inherently concerns it? And not only — in Harvey's terms — to worship it in a postmodernist gesture as a necessary state-produced restructuring? And apropos postmodernism: the thrilling potential of capital's dynamism, which is supposed to point to our limitless malleability and freedom — can the Left even see it in the face of current reconfigurations, or has even postmodernism already regressed too far through its naturalization? Was the moment of anti-neoliberal excitement of the anti-war movement our great — now long-missed — moment? To what extent has it changed our perception of space and time, our consciousness of history, our understanding of Marxism and the Left? How can we approach these questions without merely explanatorily naturalizing our failure after the fact — and damning ourselves to prove our theory of eternal capitalism in the future? **|P**

[1] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

[2] Kathrin D. and Andreas Wintersperger, "Über David Harveys *Condition of Postmodernity*" (January 12, 2025), <https://youtu.be/6XoHcDnrvdQ>.

[3] See A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 115.

[4] Chris Cutrone, "A cry of protest before accommodation? The dialectic of emancipation and domination," *Platypus Review* 42 (December 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/12/01/cry-of-protest-before-accommodation/>.

[5] Chris Cutrone, "Capital in history: The need for a Marxian philosophy of history of the Left," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008), <https://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/capital-in-history-the-need-for-a-marxian-philosophy-of-history-of-the-left/>.

[6] Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 45–46.

[7] Ibid., 121–22.

[8] Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. 2, *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 22.

[9] Quoted in Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, 10.

[10] David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

[11] Ibid., 1.

[12] Ibid., 7.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Kevin Anderson, Chris Cutrone, Nick Kreitman, Danny Postel, and Adam Turl, "Imperialism: What is it, and why should we be against it?," *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), <https://platypus1917.org/2010/07/09/imperialism-what-is-it-why-should-we-be-against-it/>.

[15] Harvey, *New Imperialism*, 190.

[16] Ibid., 210–11.

[17] See Michael Grunwald, *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

[18] See D. L. Jacobs, "What was the Millennial Left?," *Platypus Review* 137 (June 2021), <https://platypus1917.org/2021/06/01/what-was-the-millennial-left/>.

[19] David Harvey, "Why the U.S. stimulus package is bound to fail," *Platypus Review* 11 (March 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/03/15/why-the-us-stimulus-package-is-bound-to-fail/>.

[20] Ian Morrison, "Resurrecting the '30s: A response to David Harvey and James Heartfield," *Platypus Review* 12 (May 2009), <https://platypus1917.org/2009/05/15/resurrecting-the-30s/>.

[21] Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 278.

[22] Adam Smith, "Of the Expence of the Institutions for the Education of Youth," in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2, ed. Edwin Cannon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 302–04.

[23] G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rausch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 22.

On David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*

Kathrin D. and Andreas Wintersperger

On January 12, 2025, Platypus Affiliated Society members Kathrin D. and Andreas Wintersperger gave a teach-in on David Harvey's book The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change *(1989)*[1] *during the Platypus Weekend in Cologne, Germany.*[2] *An edited English translation follows.*

> "A statesman . . . must wait until he hears the steps of God sounding through events, then leap up and grasp the hem of His garment."
> — Otto von Bismarck[3]

> "If we imagine that history is on our side, we threaten to rationalize a course of change already underway that we have yet to control. Our protest against it may already be our resignation to it, in the guise of calling us to task."
> — Chris Cutrone, "A cry of protest before accommodation?"[4]

Introduction

What is the task of the Left in history? What is the task of capital in history? What is history? Under conditions of bourgeois cooperation, any serious intellectual endeavor troubling itself — at least nominally — with changing society as a whole is necessarily directed towards its own historical orientation: how did what we want to change come about? What are its historical conditions? What is the concrete through which we recognize the universal? And what is the universal through which we can identify the concrete? Behind society's deeply damaged attempts to become aware of its own direction, the current, more or less deformed, intellectual instinct already indicates that the world has changed. What is the reality of the past in the present?

A founding text of the Platypus Affiliated Society by Chris Cutrone states: "We in Platypus focus on the history of the Left because we think that the narrative one tells about this history is in fact one's theory of the present. Implicitly or explicitly, in one's conception of the history of the Left, is an account of how the present came to be. By focusing on the history of the Left, or, by adopting a Left-centric view of history, we hypothesize that the most important determinations of the present are the result of what the Left has done or failed to do historically."[5]

What kind of history does David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity* — 35 years after its publication — give to the present? What does Harvey's concept of post-Fordism mean at the end of neoliberalism? What is historical change under, with, and of a dead Left?

How does Harvey approach the capitalist reconfiguration of post-Fordism?

In the 1970s and 80s, postmodernist theories increasingly dominated cultural debates, social criticism, and the activism of the new social movements. At the end of the 80s, this prompted Harvey to examine the theories of thinkers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida in the context of their time. He endeavored to further develop Marxism by linking economic and political analyses with a changed perception of space and time, which he identified in postmodern culture. He was not interested in a vulgar materialist explanation, but in understanding a *new total way of life* and its institutional conditions. As an isolated academic without a clear addressee, Harvey speculated on what insights into capitalism could be derived from the "condition of postmodernity" for the future.

The concept of postmodernism emerged in the course of the 1970s in art and as a reaction to the exploding cultural sector, which Harvey focuses on. This presentation is therefore also based on aesthetics. Postmodern theory, art, design, and urban planning are united by resistance to modernism — the latter is accused of positivism, rationalism, ethnocentrism, universalism, and standardization. In contrast, postmodernism appears to be inspired by a reawakened sense of the limitless malleability of man. The post-war cityscape, characterized by uniform grids of skyscrapers, briefly gave way to a collage-like diversity that satisfied diversified consumer needs in major U.S. cities. Along these lines postmodernist philosophy, anthropology, and social criticism celebrated heterogeneity, contrast, fragmentation, and indeterminacy as liberating impulses. Foucault exemplarily condemned meta-language and meta-theories, which are supposed to connect all phenomena, as the seeds of "fascism in our heads."[6]

What is modernism about?

High modernism, the target of postmodernism, designates the prevailing aesthetic of the cityscape during the Cold War (1950s–60s). Its functionalism — the specification of form by function — demanded materials such as concrete, glass, and steel. The function was the efficient creation of living space for the masses through state coordination — hence the grid structure of modernist cities. One of Harvey's great intellectual achievements is to break down this *high modernism* as a state-integrated, *rigidified modernism*.

Its protagonist, the New Deal state, emerged at the end of the 1920s from the need for a new mode of state regulation in the face of novel Fordist production and widespread underconsumption. According to Harvey, it was almost unprecedented and could be compared in its authoritarianism and interventionism with the Bonapartist interventions of the Second French Empire. Harvey writes:

> A regime of accumulation 'describes the stabilization over a long period of the allocation of the net product between consumption and accumulation; it implies some correspondence between the transformation of both the conditions of production and the conditions of reproduction of wage earners.' A particular system of accumulation can exist because 'its schema of reproduction is coherent.' The problem, however, is to bring the behaviours of all kinds of individuals — capitalists, workers, state employees, financiers, and all manner of other political-economic agents — into some kind of configuration that will keep the regime of accumulation functioning. There must exist, therefore, 'a materialization of the regime of accumulation taking the form of norms, habits, laws, regulating networks and so on that ensure the unity of the process, i.e. the appropriate consistency of individual behaviours with the schema of reproduction. This body of interiorized rules and social processes is called *the mode of regulation*.'[7]

20 years earlier, the automotive pioneer Henry Ford failed to "create a new man" due to his isolation. He paid his assembly-line workers better for their dull manual work, and at the same time sent social workers to their families to ensure a functional married life and, for example, abstinence from alcohol. Through the New Deal, his dream was realized on a large scale in the Fordist accumulation regime by nationwide job-creation programs, Keynesian economic regulation, and mass propaganda. The influential journalist Walter Lippmann wrote about the New Deal state in 1933: "At the end of February, we were a congeries of disorderly, panic-stricken mobs and factions. In the hundred days from March to June [1933] we became again an organized nation confident of our power to provide for our own security and to control our own destiny."[8]

Harvey describes the New Left as a harbinger of postmodernism due to its criticism of the resulting rigid bureaucracy of the New Deal state and its trade-union apparatus, its politics of counter-cultural iconoclasm in clothing, music, language, and lifestyle; and its anti-authoritarian revolt. According to their self-image, they countered the uniform rigidity of the world with an exhilarating dynamism and fleetingness — and hoped for the liberation of humanity from capitalist rule. It is this impulse that postmodern culture and theories inherited, and which appeared attractive to the new social movements from the end of the 1960s onwards (feminism, gays, ethnic and religious groups, regional autonomism, etc.). While the New Left failed politically to liberate humanity from capitalist domination, it celebrated a cultural and academic triumph.

Around 20 years after 1968, Harvey intervened with a clarification: ideas of dynamism and transience were not, or not always, alien to modernism either. It is rooted in the middle of the 19th century, when the crisis of the bourgeois social ideal became apparent in the course of industrialization. Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) articulates the artist's self-image in this crisis: "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable." The artist should capture and mediate both. With Baudelaire, the whole of modern art and its epochs can be seen as a struggle for the interplay of the two halves.

According to Harvey, the failure to overcome this crisis, the failed socialist world revolution, was culturally paralleled after the First World War (1930–60) by the gradual ossification of the modernist struggle for the relationship between impressionism and the eternal. Modernism once attempted repeatedly to capture a crisis-ridden relationship between the eternal and the impressionistic in the face of the crisis of society caused by industrialization, massification, and the resulting struggle of revolutionary movements against the powers of the status quo (1848, 1871, 1917). In the name of the "free world," as the hallmark of a new American dream and promise of progress for the Third World, modernism was consolidated into a state-appropriated aesthetic in infrastructure, prestige projects, and propaganda posters for job-creation programs. This was a global phenomenon: even National Socialist Germany could not avoid commissioning the ex-Bauhaus architect Albert Speer to design its concentration camps. In the establishment of a "modernist form," the negotiation of substance, which it once accounted for, became arbitrary. This naturalized form could pull the slum-dwelling masses of workers out of poverty, and send them not into world revolution, but the Second World War in "class community" with the capitalists, culminating in the reconstruction of war-torn nations as high modernism. This all-encompassing aesthetic and rhythm of life fundamentally changed the perception of space and time — what Harvey calls spatio-temporal fixations that stabilize the accumulation regime.

The New Left rebelled against this diffusing integration of modernism. According to Harvey, however, it was not aware of the genesis of the Fordist accumulation regime, based on the failure of world revolution. The New Left was unable to critically capture the lost complexity with which modern revolutionary movements and art dealt with the liberation of humanity, and instead identified the modernism of its time, high modernism, with its entire history. Thus, it completely rejected the modernist project. Paradoxically, the New Left behaved affirmatively towards the state, rightly criticized as authoritarian, by conceding to it the control of the modernist narrative — and with it, history. Harvey describes how the one-sided criticism of modernism (as eternal and rigid) has led to an overemphasis on its other facet (dynamism) as a supposed antidote. His historical retracing of the history of modernism intends to be a belated intervention in this unconscious, veiled concession of the Left to the reality of the state against which it superficially rebelled. The Left's unconscious assistance in the emergence of the post-Fordist accumulation regime was thus sealed.

The integration of postmodernist impulses into a post-Fordist accumulation regime

The Leftist structure of feeling revolted against modernism with localist impulses of "suppressed" voices like those of women or blacks — those excluded from the old, now-crumbling trade-union apparatus and mass consumerism. Everyone should be allowed to have their voice in the plastic metropolis. The Fordist state and its accumulation regime were pressured to adapt its strategy. New (communication) technologies, a new wave of commodification of cultural goods, and a revival of ethno-aesthetics satisfied diversified needs — at least for those with the power to pay. Extensive planning was replaced by exchanges between various districts and cities, which were to restructure themselves independently and in competition with each other. New urban-development strategies included the organization of cultural festivals, which quickly became commercialized. They attracted new human material, young professionals, to deindustrializing cities. The newly introduced capital changed the cityscape into a collage by expanding the event and entertainment industry. Their fast pace in turn required adequate restructuring in a growing financial sector. A new spatio-temporal fixation had emerged.

According to Harvey, the original celebration of ethnic diversity through cultural festivals was not least an appeasing reaction to the riotous demonstrations of the 1960s, during which modernist office districts burned in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Harvey draws on Marxism to teach the lesson of capitalism's flexibility and capacity for integration — the historical constant. He also shows how the neoliberal state is not an overcoming of the New Deal state, but merely its continuation, made appropriate to the challenges of its time. The post-Fordist accumulation regime inherited the task of disciplining the labor force in a reconfiguration of production and consumption through the provision of infrastructure, and integrated the Leftist revolt — the new needs — for this purpose: The state becomes postmodern.

However, if in the 1970s and 80s the Left consciously and theoretically expressed the disposal of history through postmodernism as a current, as Harvey depicts, its current attitude to history appears completely obscure due to its naturalization in the post-Fordist accumulation regime. If we — thinking with Harvey — have not known for a long time what the Left is fighting for, what is the Left actually fighting against in our moment?

David Harvey and the Millennial Left

I. Imperialism

While the critical strength of Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity* was precisely to show the extent to which there is a contradiction between continuity and change, new and old in capitalist change, which the legacy of the New Left could only ever resolve on one side, Harvey's perspective changed with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In his book *The New Imperialism* (2003), Harvey, who was born in England in 1935, writes that for him, "it feels passing strange to come to consciousness of the world at the moment of one empire's passing and to come to retirement age at a moment of such public proclamations of the official birth of another."[10] By the official birth of another empire, Harvey, whose understanding of the world, as he says, "during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath,"[11] means the "overt recognition of empire and of imperialism [of the U.S.] by those on the right as well as those of a liberal persuasion."[12] At the same time as the demand for an open and explicit "imperial" foreign policy on the part of the U.S. emerged, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) was published. Harvey writes:

> the publication of Hardt and Negri's Empire in 2000, and the controversy that surrounded it, challenged traditional debates and suggested that left opposition had to be rethought in relation to a decentred configuration of empire that had many new, postmodern, qualities. While critical of this line of argument, many others on the left began to recognize that the forces of globalization (however those might be construed) were creating a novel situation that required a new framework of analysis. . . . The effect has been to turn the questions of empire and of imperialism into open topics of debate across the political spectrum (it was noteworthy that Hardt and Negri's work gained attention in the mainstream media). But this then poses the further question: what, if anything, is new about all this?[13]

Three years after the publication of Harvey's *New Imperialism*, the Platypus Affiliated Society was founded to organize and hold its first panel discussion: "Imperialism: What is it, why should we be against it?"[14]

II. A new New Deal

The New Imperialism can be seen as intervention in Left-wing debates on imperialism at the time by using the method he developed in the 1980s. If Harvey attempted in *The Condition of Postmodernity* to show theoretically how the perennially occurring crises of overproduction in capitalism make new spatio-temporal fixations necessary in order to enable the continued accumulation of capital, also changing our subjective experience of such fundamental categories as space and time, it now became necessary to understand the logic of imperialism against the background of these new and changing spatio-temporal fixations.

Harvey argues: "Even before the events of 9/11, it was clear that neo-liberal imperialism was weakening on the inside, that even the asset values on Wall Street could not be protected, and that the days of neo-liberalism and its specific forms of imperialism were numbered. The big issue was what kind of relation between the territorial and capitalistic logics of power would now emerge and what kind of imperialism it would produce."[15]

Looking back on the history of the last 20 years since the publication of the book, i.e. the period of the Millennial Left, Harvey's answer to the question of what imperialism will be produced by the newly emerging regime of accumulation needs to be foregrounded. He writes:

> There are, of course, far more radical solutions lurking in the wings, but the construction of a new 'New Deal' led by the United States and Europe, both domestically and internationally, in the face of the overwhelming class forces and special interests ranged against it, is surely enough to fight for in the present conjuncture. And the thought that it might, by adequate pursuit of some long term spatio-temporal fix, actually assuage the problems of overaccumulation for at least a few years and diminish the need to accumulate by dispossession might encourage democratic, progressive, and humane forces to align behind it and turn it into some kind of practical reality. This does seem to propose a far less violent and far more benevolent imperial trajectory than the raw militaristic imperialism currently offered up by the neo-conservative movement in the United States.[16]

The picture is clear: Harvey's preferred response to the worst excesses of the "neo-conservative" crude imperialism of neoliberalism is a kind of new New Deal led by the U.S. and Europe. This should "diminish the need to accumulate by dispossession" or at least put it on hold for a few years. Thus, following Harvey at the beginning of the Millennial Left, we find the political argument for a "far more benevolent imperial trajectory," which — based on Kautsky's theory of ultra-imperialism — "might encourage democratic, progressive, and humane forces to align behind it and turn it into some kind of practical reality."

In the wake of the global economic crisis of 2008, the newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in early 2009, an economic stimulus program that the Obama administration itself would later refer to as the "New New Deal."[17] This supposed new New Deal was met with fierce resistance. On the Republican side, it was a key reason for the founding of the Tea Party, which would later find its "echo" in the Occupy Wall Street movement.[18] Left-wing advocates of a New Deal, such as Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman and David Harvey himself, were also bitterly disappointed.

In a 2009 contribution to the *Platypus Review* entitled "Why the U.S. stimulus package is bound to fail," Harvey argues that the Keynesian economic policy he calls for should no longer be implemented under the leadership of the U.S. and Europe, but that of China. However, the task of "the West" in view of the "tectonic shifts" within the current spatio-temporal fixation of capitalist development is clear:

> That is not a heartening thought but then thinking of such a prospect might just awaken much of the West to the urgency of the task before it and get political leaders to stop preaching banalities about restoring trust and confidence and get down to doing what has to be done to rescue capitalism from the capitalists and their false neoliberal ideology. And if that means socialism, nationalizations, strong state direction, binding international collaborations, and a new and far more inclusive (dare I say "democratic") international financial architecture, then so be it.[19]

Platypus member Ian Morrison formulated the following critical perspective, also published in the *Platypus Review*, in his response to Harvey's text:

> The Left's current resurrection of the New Deal imagination is an example of the all-too-common practice on the Left of calling defeat victory. Young Leftists should realize that the crucial objection Mills and others on the Left made in the aftermath of the failures of the 1930s was directed precisely against nationalization. For, in reality, the 30s witnessed the most horrific defeat for internationalism. How else could one describe the events leading up to World War II for the Left? And, after all, the New Deal was also only one form that political nationalization took during that decade. With the erosion of the international socialist revolution over the course of the 1920s, Roosevelt's New Deal emerged in competition with other major political ideologies, especially Stalinist "socialism in one country" and German National Socialist variants, which also oversaw a period of intense industrialization, and should not be left out of consideration. Of course, while the political differences among these forms matter a great deal, it is necessary to point out how vague the call for national re-industrialization becomes when discussed in solely economic, and not political, terms. From today's vantage point, the inability of the 1960s' New Left to work through the nationalization of the Left has made the marginal character of the contemporary "Left" seem rather well deserved. However interconnected and globalized the world may now appear, politically it is nothing of the kind. The increasingly uneven and "flexible" geographical development, which Harvey so lucidly illustrates, demands a political solution. . . . And exactly which industries will become key sites of political struggle, whether it is mid-20th century-style durable-goods production or new, service-sector industries, or both, it all remains highly vague without testing the waters. But new organizational and tactical difficulties should not inhibit the Left ideologically from making bold claims and audacious demands. Moreover, these difficulties should not inhibit the intellectual from laying bare the reality of the past, no matter how daunting.[20]

Why is Harvey speaking to us today?

The Condition of Postmodernity attempts to take belated responsibility for the failure of the Left two decades before and bears witness to how the misrecognition of the problem of modernism — history — leads to an affirmative politics. Affirmative here means the provision of a structure of perception and feeling for a subsequent regime of accumulation, post-Fordism. What shines through in the work is that — measured by the New Left's own standards — more would have been possible. But did the New Left — which Harvey calls the "anti-modern" Left — really fail because of a recognition problem? Was there really no one in the New Left who recognized not only the static but also the dynamic moment in modernism? If so, why was this analysis unable to assert itself or bear fruit politically and practically? Harvey ignores these questions and thus logically identifies the New Left with postmodernism — with the theories and the lifestyle that became "fixed" after its failure — despite his critical adherence to a broader horizon of possibilities.

In "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" (1969), Adorno writes: "Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized."[21] For Harvey, the practice of the New Left, which has failed to overcome capitalism, is the "source of power" for his "theory." Only a pale reflection of a utopia-realizing practice can be glimpsed in his

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